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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the acquisition of the interactional competence in an environment where children used two or three languages every day. Two aspects were examined: the acquisition of culturemes such as thanking and greeting, and the comprehension of indirect requests. The bilingual children observed were eight Swedish-Estonian children, six German-Swedish children, and six German-English children. The trilingual children observed were three Estonian-Swedish-German children and four Swedish-English-German children. The children ranged in age from 1 to 7. Results of the study showed that verbal and nonverbal behavior are important in the case of the politeness culturemes. They are taught and drilled by the parents, often by using indirect requests. There were no significant differences between bilingual and trilingual children. The analysis of comprehension of indirect requests in natural settings showed that not only is the type of indirect request important, but also the "token" is important. The frequency of the tokens in the child's environment appears to be a basic factor in their being acquired. (NCR)

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THE ACQUISITION OF INTERACTIONAL COMPETENCE IN BI- AND TRILINGUAL ENVIRONMENT

Els Oksaar

1. INTRODUCTION

My study is concerned with the acquisition of the interactional competence in an environment, where children were exposed to and used two or three languages every day. The present paper examines two aspects of it: the acquisition of culturemes such as thanking and greeting and the comprehension of indirect requests. The data are mainly from my longitudinal Multilingual Language Acquisition Project that is part of the Paedolinguistic Projects of Language Acquisition at the Pre-School Age[1] at the Institute of General Linguistics at Hamburg University. It is undertaken to establish a theory of the acquisition of linguistic and interactive competence in the early years. The subjects are children in a mono-, bi-, tri- and quadrilingual environment. The focus of data collection is on spontaneous speech in natural play and family-life settings at the children's homes and surroundings, but various tests and role-plays were also carried out; we may speak of modified laboratory conditions in these cases.

The bilingual data of the project are derived from 8 Swedish-Estonian children (age 1;8 - 6;7) in Stockholm, 6 German-Swedish children (age 1;7 - 7;0) in Hamburg, 6 German-English children (age 1;10 - 6;8) in Hamburg. See also 3.3.1 and 3.3.2.

The trilingual data of the project are derived from 3 Estonian-Swedish-German children (age 2;1 - 7) in Stockholm and 4 Swedish-English-German children (age 2;8 - 6;7) in Hamburg.

The parents' and caregivers' behaviour was

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taped and protocolled, too. The socio-economic status of the parents varied from lower to upper middle class.

1.1. First I shall give some prelimenaries and the theoretical frame of the study, define some concepts which I am working with, and then discuss empirical evidence.

What I mean by interactional competence, however, must be explained now to avoid misunderstandings: I define interactional competence as the ability of a person - in interactional situations - to perform and interprete verbal and nonverbal communicative actions according to the socio-cultural and socio-psychological rules of a group.[2] Failure to acquire this competence could have unfavourable consequences for interpersonal relations.

1.1.1. The following preliminaries are important for our paedolinguistic research:

A child first receives language, that is the verbal means of communication, in the role of a listener, long before it is active in the role of a speaker.

A child first receives interactional items - culturemes/behavioremes (see 2.1) - through looking at the behaviour of others, together with listening, long before it is actively interacting himself by these means.

Investigations of the development of interactional competence have to work with at least two concepts of context: the linguistic and situational context.

Learning a language as a means of communication not only requires that a child masters the linguistic material according to the grammatical rules, but also that he acquires the ability to judge the conditions for using this material and that he masters the rules of these conditions, including change of register and strategies of code switching, as is the case for multi-lingual children.

When acquiring interactional competence, the child must develop the ability to recognize the sociocultural and the linguistic demands for each different situation and to react appropriately to them. If a German or Estonian child understands the semantic structure of the word man and can use the sentence here comes a man correctly, still he must learn which sociocultural rules do not allow the sentence hello, man and demand instead hello, Mister Miller. A child has to learn how to greet, how to ask for something, how to express emotions, how to avoid conflicts, what cannot be talked about, strategies of contact, etc.

A child has also to learn that when people interact, most linguistic utterances seldom fulfill only one function - according to Karl Bühler's (1934) organon model a word can be used in its referential, expressive and appelative functions. Roman Jakobson (1960) has added three more functions, the phatic function being of great importance. The child has to learn, however, that there is functional dominance, which depends partly on the situation and partly on the sociocultural frame in which something is said. This is the case of indirect requests when a declarative sentence like: the door is open is said in the appelative function: please close the door.

A child learns the socio-cultural and socio-psychological rules of a group gradually, whereby it must also learn to synchronize verbal actions with nonverbal ones: to say Hello, Mister Miller, to look at him, extend hands etc.

1.1.2. Hello belongs to the verbal behavioremes of greeting. Greeting, thanking, excuses and other sociocultural behaviour patterns constitute culturemes. The question of how and when a child learns the appropriate realization of culturemes has for a long time been fully ignored in research. First in the seventies there was awaking interest in these matters (Gleason

and Weintraub, 1976; Ochs and Schieffelin,1979).

So far, attention has been paid to the verbal part of the greeting only. But the nonverbal part of it and its synchronization with the verbal one are equally important in interaction: the action of the eyes, head, hands. To smile or not when greeting somebody and so on.

We know from previous research that parents prompt verbal behavioremes (Greif and Gleason, 1980). How and when do children learn to behave nonverbally in interactional situations? - This question has not been asked. We are asking and trying to find answers to it in our ongoing projects. So much can be said from this ongoing research: children are prompted concerning the action with hands and bowing. Smiling, however, has been acquired through imitation of the partner, usually parents.

Different nations such as Estonians, Swedes, Englishmen and Germans may have different sociocultural patterns. Thus also the interactional competences of the people may differ.

Bi- and trilingual children acquire their different interactional competences through direct tutelage - prompting and through indirect tutelage - imitation and through the so called partner-pressure.

2. THEORETICAL FRAME

2.1. The theoretical frame of my paper starts with two concepts: cultureme and behavioreme. The mere fact that people greet each other is a cultureme, a culturally determined behavioral pattern, how they express it, is a behavioreme. The so called routine does not cover this necessary difference. A behavioreme is the realization of a cultureme. It can be nonverbal, verbal or both simultaneously. Thus in German culture: nodding the head only, or saying Guten Tag, literally "good day" or doing both and also shaking

hands. An approach to the communicative and interactive behaviour of the child is necessarily an integrative approach, combining verbal and nonverbal factors in the communicative act (Oksaar, 1975a, 1981).

What happens, when a child is growing up in a bi- or trilingual environment having to learn different kinds of realizations of culturemes as his interactional competence? Theoretically there is the possibility of situational interferences.

Situational interferences are deviations from the norms of communicative behaviour (verbal and nonverbal) of one community through the influence of another. For example when German-English children use only one form of adressing - Du - instead of two - Du and Sie. It is necessary to differentiate between linguistic and situational interferences, because you may be linguistically correct, but situationally wrong when answering with please in English when somebody has said thank you to you. In German bitte "please" is correct in this situation. In language contact studies the concept of interference has usually been understood as linguistic interference. But this concept cannot account for interferences we find in interactional settings, therefore I have suggested (Oksaar 1976) to differentiate between linguistic and situational interferences.

3. POLITENESS CULTUREMES

3.1. Bilingual Environment

The bilingual children heard Swedish and Estonian or German and Swedish or German and English every day. There were 80 culturemegenerating communicative acts in every language together with fathers, mothers, and/or caregivers and acquaintances during a period of 6 months for thanking and 70 cultureme -generating communicative acts for greeting.

3.1.1. Thanking

Spontaneous thanking occured in 22% (105) of cases only (n = 477), being highest in case of the older children (age 4;6 - 7), who also prompted the younger ones. However, most spontaneous production of the behavioremes was observed in Estonian speaking environment, 62% of the spontaneous thankings (65 of 105), least in the English one 11%, followed by Swedish 13% and German 14%.

A bilingual child (4;2) with an Estonian mother and Swedish father thanked 33% more in equal situations (having received a toy or a cake; having been passed a thing etc.), when speaking Estonian than when speaking Swedish.

This fact is interesting, because adult Swedes thank in considerably more situations than Estonians, among other things both before receiving something and after. It shows that prompts from parents play an important role in the acquisition of the cultureme. Estonians prompted their children 46% more than Swedes, mothers and fathers equally. Swedish mothers prompted more (28%) than Swedish fathers.

There was no mixing of languages in this special cultureme, however, a few mixings of situations could be observed. One case concerning a German-English child (4;0): He gets a sausage at the butchers in the morning and starts eating. His mother says: (in German) What do you say? - Child: (silence). Mother: Don't you know what to say? Child: Good morning! - That is what to say first when you meet an acquaintant in the morning! The child behaved according to the rules of person and time, however, not observing the rules of action and acted upon.

As all of the children had learned their languages through the principle: one person - one language, there were hardly ever code switchings with linguistic interferences during the

same communicative act. Only a few cases of situational interferences occured. 2 German-English children, age 4;6 and 5;2, sometimes used please in English according to the German model, where the English model has silence (or the American one you are welcome). Type: When handing over a newspaper to his father and he said thank you the child answered please.

3.1.2. Greeting

Spontaneous greeting occured in 31% (137) of cases (n = 422), there were, however, no such environmental differences, as was the case with thanking. Spontaneous greeting was highest in case of the older children (4 - 7), the younger ones (2 - 4) had 12% more spontaneous greetings than thanking.

What concerns nonverbal behavioremes of the politeness cultureme, the younger children (age 2 - 4) generally did not want to shake hands when greeting, though they were prompted to do so (only 2 children did so in 42% of the greeting situations). The cultureme greeting requires, when speaking Estonian or German, in many situations also hand-shaking. Children were prompted to shake hands, but the younger ones, up to 4 often refused. However, the cultureme greeting also requires that people usually have eye contact and smile or at least does not look angry. Pre-school children seem to learn these features mostly by imitating their parents or caregivers. They were actively prompted what to do with their eyes, when greeting somebody, only by Estonian parents: in Estonian vaata otsa, literally "look at the top".

3.2. Trilingual Environment

The trilingual children heard Estonian, Swedish and German or Swedish-English and German every day. I have in earlier publications (Oksaar 1975b; 1978) analyzed the functionality of their code switching and the creative aspects of their interferences. Concerning the behavioremes of

politeness culturemes there were no significant differences between bilingual and trilingual children. Children older than 3;6 - 4 years, were accomplishing more items of thanking and greeting than the younger ones.

3.3. Awareness of the Politeness culturemes

3.3.1. Little research has been done on the children's knowledge of sociocultural and pragmatic rules for language use. When Kirsten 1;9 says in German (fi: dank), that is vielen Dank "thank you very much" when someone offers her something, this need not yet be the result of her awareness of this interaction rule in the realm of politeness. From the analysis of our corpus it can be seen that, while playing with their dolls and teddy bears, Estonian, Swedish and German speaking children around the age of 2;6 to 3 were all aware of the cultureme greeting and realized it through the most common verbal behavioremes in their respective languages: Estonian tere, Swedish goddag, German guten Tag. When Christina, age 2;6, prompts her Swedish doll: säg goddag "say hello", this shows that a certain knowledge of the interaction rules may be present. More information was gained through the following study of pragmatic understanding with 10 German-English bilingual children (2;5 - 7;0) in Hamburg. They were shown four teddy bears, which all looked the same. The teddies asked (on tape) in German, in different ways for an apple and thanked, except one of them, again in different ways, after having received the apple.

The children had to decide which had asked the nicest, and which had said thank you in the nicest way after he had received the apple. Eight children between the age of 2;7 and 4;2 found the indicative sentences with German bitte and danke the nicest. Conjunctive sentences with könnte "could" and dürfte "may" such as dürfte ich einen Apfel bekommen, indicative in English "may I have an apple" or Ich bedanke mich "I thank you", were reacted to only by children

older than 5. Non-use of thank you was considered bad by 90% of the children. The youngest 2;5 did not react to non-use of the politeness routine.

Three weeks later the same procedure was carried through in English. There were interesting differences: requests such as may I have an apple were found nicest also by children age 3;7 upwards.

3.3.2. Concerning nonverbal behaviour, 10 German-English bilingual children, 5 boys, 5 girls, age between 7 and 8 years, were asked, in single conversations, whether they have to shake hands, when greeting somebody in German. The answer was yes, only one boy did not know. Three weeks later they were asked the same question in English, the answer from all was no.

4. INDIRECT REQUESTS

4.1. The use and understanding of indirect requests is an important part of interactional competence. There is little empirical research done in this area. Clark and Lucy (1975) were among the first to study adult comprehension of different types of indirect requests. Children's abilities in this area have been looked upon primarily from the point of view of productive competence. One of the recent studies of children's comprehension of various specific types of indirect requests by Carrell (1981), which is carried out in an experimental mode, showed that children, age between 4 and 7 years, are able to comprehend a wide variety of indirect requests, that there is a general developmental pattern of acquisition, and that the relationship between request type and ease of comprehension is strikingly similar for both children and adults. This experimental approach, however, has to be extended to testing children's comprehension of indirect requests also in "contextualized settings, in order to begin to synthesize the 'decontextualized' experimental findings with the

contextualized, observational data" (Carrell 1981:344). The current study focuses on comprehension of indirect requests in natural contextualized settings.

4.2. So far most research has been carried out on the basis of the English language only. Furthermore, no investigations have been made with bi- and trilingual children. The question arises: Do the general developmental pattern vary in various languages? How well does a bi- or trilingual child aged 4 to 7 understand the same type of indirect requests in his various languages?

My data in contextualized settings (87 indirect request-generating communicative acts in every language) show that there is a difference between Indoeuropean and Nonindoeuropean (in our study Estonian, a Finno-Ugric language) languages. Certain kind of declarative forms seemed to be more difficult to understand than interrogative forms. The Estonian question kas sa pead ukse lahti tegema? "must you open the door?" as an indirect request "please don't open the door" was understood by all Swedish-Estonian children and responded by action. The declarative form: uks on lahti "the door is open", was correctly understood only by the older children (aged 5 to 7 years), and acted upon: the door was closed.

However, when addressed in Swedish (on another occasion): maten är färdig "the meal is ready", also the 4 year old followed the indirect request. Methodologically it is important to state that not the type of the indirect request alone, but also the token is important. The frequency of the tokens in the environment of the child seems to be a basic factor for their acquirement. The child learns behavioral tokens matching to situations first and afterwards the types.

Results, based on English language only and

on tests in laboratory situations, stating that "interrogative forms of indirect requests are more difficult than declarative forms", and "conveyed negative requests are more difficult than corresponding conveyed positive requests" (Carrell 1981:329) must thus be relativized in the light of data from other languages and natural settings.

5. SUMMARY

This study has shown that the verbal and the nonverbal part of a behavioreme are both important in case of the politeness culturemes. They are "taught and drilled", often using indirect requests. There were no significant differences between bi- and trilingual children; children older than 3;6 - 4 performed more items of the total behavioreme of the politeness cultureme than the younger ones. Spontaneous thanking occured in 22% of cases, spontaneous greeting in 31%. There were only a few situational interferences, and hardly ever code switchings with linguistic interferences during the same communicative act. Already the 2;5 year old were aware of the politeness culturemes in the sociocultural frame of their various languages. The micro-level of analysis showed interesting differences in verbal and nonverbal behaviour.

There were separate models of prompting: generally mothers prompted more than fathers. Estonian mothers and fathers prompted their children most, Swedish fathers the least. Children were prompted not only concerning the verbal behavioremes of a cultureme, but also the nonverbal ones: action with hands and bowing, but not smiling. Only Estonian parents told their children to have eye contact when greeting somebody.

The analysis of comprehension of indirect requests in natural settings showed that not the type of the indirect request alone, but also the token is important. In the light of data

from other languages than English and from non-laboratory settings, we get new results in this field. A comprehensive analysis will be reported (Oksaar in preparation).

NOTES

1) For information about these projects and methodological questions see Oksaar (1980) and (1981).
2) For the discussion of communicative and interactional competence see Oksaar (1977:138-141).

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